DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 251 755 CG 017 883

AUTHOR Rush, Michael C.; And Others
TITLE Consensual Agreement in Leader Behavior Descriptions and Leader Prototypes.
PUB DATE Mar 84
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association (30th, New Orleans, LA, March 28-31, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Patterns; Employees; Graduate Students; Higher Education; *Leaders; Profiles; *Schemata (Cognition); Social Cognition
IDENTIFIERS *Behavior Descriptions; *Consensus; Prototypes

ABSTRACT

The proposition that individuals process social information in terms of existing cognitive schemata has generated considerable research suggesting that behavioral descriptions of leaders reflect individually held prototypes of leadership rather than descriptive reports of behavior. While plausible, evidence of such claims is difficult to show unequivocally since the research often involves individual level, within-person analyses. A between-person strategy was used to examine whether people with diverse backgrounds, who held common prototypes of leadership, would describe their leaders in a similar fashion. Employed graduate students (N=60) were asked to provide descriptions of their supervisors as well as prototypic (ideal) good and poor leader descriptions. Results showed a significant correlation between described and good leader profiles for those evaluating their supervisor as good, and between described and poor leader profiles for those describing their supervisor as poor. These results indicate a marked tendency for individuals with diverse backgrounds and experience, who hold common evaluatively labeled prototypes of leadership, to describe their commonly evaluated leaders in a similar fashion. The results, while not indicating that descriptions and prototypes are isomorphic, do suggest that evaluative judgments trigger particular prototypes instrumental in the process of reconstructive memory and description. (Author/JAC)

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Consensual Agreement in Leader Behavior Descriptions and Leader Prototypes

Michael C. Rush, Joyce E. A. Russell
and
Bernard Kosevsky

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

CG 017883

Paper presented at the 1984 meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, March, New Orleans, LA.

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Abstract

Recent attention to the proposition that individuals process social information in terms of existing cognitive schemata has generated considerable research suggesting that behavioral descriptions of leaders reflect individually held prototypes of leadership rather than descriptive reports of behavior. While plausible, evidence of such claims is difficult to show unequivocably since the research often involves individual level, within-person analyses. Using a between-person strategy, the present study indicates a marked tendency for individuals (N=60) with diverse backgrounds and experience who hold common evaluatively labeled prototypes of leadership to describe their commonly evaluated leaders in a similar fashion. The results, while not indicating that descriptions and prototypes are isomorphic, do suggest that evaluative judgments trigger particular prototypes instrumental in the process of reconstructive memory and description.

Consensual Agreement in Leader Behavior Descriptions and Leader Prototypes

Recently, increased attention has been given to the proposition that individuals interpret and integrate social information within existing cognitive schemata, with schematic prototypes ultimately providing the bases for reconstructive memory and recall. The attention is most notable in the area of performance appraisal and leadership, where it has been suggested that behavioral descriptions of leadership, rather than representing veridical reports, are assessments highly influenced by individually held prototypes of leadership. Evidence of such claims is difficult to show unequivocably. The research often involves a within-person analysis in which a relationship between conceptual schemes and behavioral reports is demonstrated at the individual level of analysis. While supportive, the research is difficult to interpret since a significant relationship may indicate a consistent response set or style across ratings rather than schematic correspondence between prototypic and described behavioral profiles. An alternative to the use of within-person indices of profile similarity, is to examine whether people with diverse backgrounds and experience holding common prototypes of leadership tend to describe their leaders in a similar fashion (e.g., between-person strategy). Such was the purpose of the present study.

Sixty full or part-time employed graduate students (55%, 45% respectively; 23 to 55 years, 1 to 34 years tenure, 47% women) provided complete data. Content analysis of biographical information suggested that the subjects represented diverse academic backgrounds and work experience, and that none held the same job title or worked for the same supervisor. Subjects voluntarily provided behavioral descriptions of their supervisors as well as prototypic (ideal) good and poor leader descriptions. The prototypic profiles, completed in counterbalance, were obtained approximately 10 days prior to the leader descriptions. Each profile was measured on a modified 40-item version of the LBDQ (Form XII) assessing Structure, Consideration, Role Assumption and Production Emphasis. While completing the described leader profiles, subjects also provided general evaluations of their supervisor in terms of contribution to group and personal effectiveness, degree of influence and control, and amount of exhibited leadership. Each of the evaluations were assessed on a five-point scale ("nothing" to "extreme amount"). Additional items assessed a global evaluation of the leader ("very good" to "very poor") and an affective reaction to the supervisor ("very negative" to "very positive").

The 60 described leader profiles were initially subjected to a linear typal analysis (profile classification/cluster technique) designed to reveal the number and pattern of pure prototypes underlying a set of heterogeneous profile vectors. The analysis identified four significantly different described prototype clusters. Similar analyses of the prototypic leader profiles also identified four clusters each for the prototypic good and poor leader profiles. The main analysis concerned the degree of concordance (X^2 test of independence) among prototypic and described leader clusters; i.e., did people holding common prototypes tend to describe their leader in a similar fashion? Preliminary tests failed to detect any association between the described and good leader clusters (X^2=12.15, NS) or between described and poor leader clusters (X^2=653, NS). These results are not unexpected in that it is unlikely that individuals holding common prototypes would describe their leaders similarly unless they agreed in how the leaders were evaluated. This contingency is readily demonstrated by partitioning the sample on the bases of the global evaluation item (very/pretty good vs very/pretty poor, excluding neutral responses). Under these conditions, there was significant concordance between described and good leader profiles for those evaluating their supervisor as "good" (X^2=20.06, $p < .05$) and between described and poor leader profiles for those evaluating their supervisor as "poor" (X^2=14.36, $p < .05$). Similar analyses for several of the other general evaluation items revealed the same type of contingent concordant relationship (see Table 1).

These results demonstrate a marked tendency for individuals with common prototypes to describe their leaders in a common fashion, given common evaluations of the leader--a fact which seems remarkable since none of the subjects interacted with the same supervisor. While the results do not indicate that prototypes and behavioral descriptions are isomorphic, they do suggest some type of cognitive connection consistent with Feldman's (1980) proposition that global evaluative judgments trigger particular prototypes instrumental in the process of reconstructive memory.

Specifically, cognitive literature (e.g., Feldman, 1980; Srull & Wyer, 1979) and the present results suggest that people passively attend to routine social behavior in the short term, easily assimilating most information into existing schemata. Over time, assimilation may be simplified by, and result in, an evaluative label and associated prototype. When urged to recall or describe behavior, a stimulus specific general evaluative impression can be used to access the appropriate evaluatively labeled prototype. In terms of behavioral descrip-

tions of leadership, the process implies that descriptions are in part mediated by a general impression of the leader (e.g., good or bad) which serves to call into play salient schematic attributes associated with the impression when providing a description. The schema-plus-correction Hypothesis (Evans, 1967) suggests that recall of a pattern of person-related attributes can be partitioned into a subset of attributes associated with a specific evaluation-related schema, and those which aredistinct and belong to the correction portion of the description. The latter portion may be recently encountered information or person-specific features which are not easily assimilated into existing schemata. Evan's hypothesis further suggests that descriptions would not correspond exactly to prototypes, and that individuals would not describe their leaders in a similar fashion, even if they held common prototypes of leadership, unless the individuals held a similar general impression of their leader.

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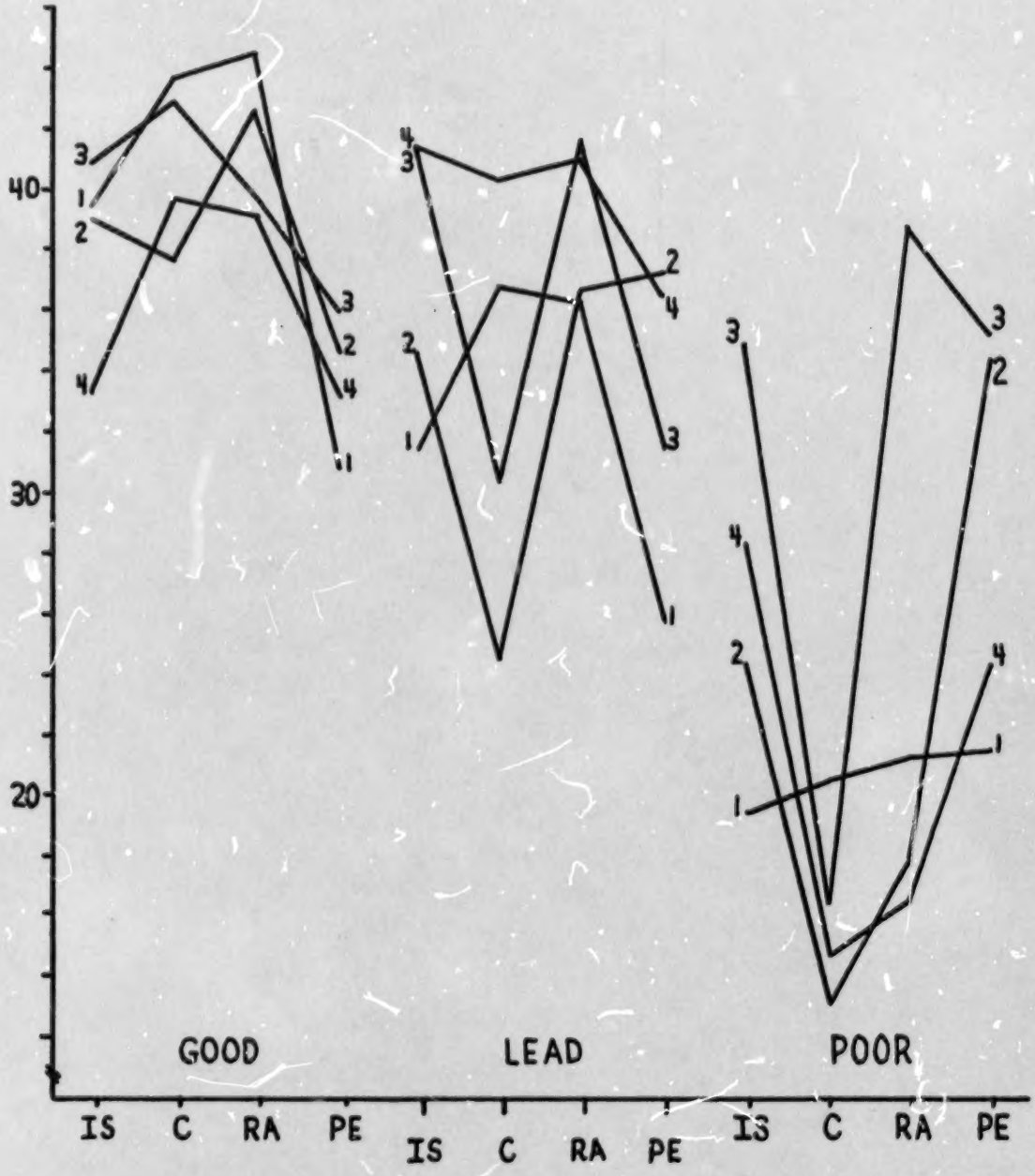
40
30
20
GOOD
LEAD
POOR
IS C RA PE
IS C RA PE
IS C RA PE

Table 1
Described and Prototypic Leader Cluster Concordance (X^2)
by Level of General Leader Evaluations

General Evaluations	f	Cluster # Poor	Cluster # Described	X^2[a]	P	PRE[b] P|D	PRE[b] D|P	Cluster # Good	Cluster # Described	X^2[a]	P	PRE[b] G|D	PRE[b] D|G
LOW													
Contribution-group	11	1-4	1,2	6.29	.09	.29	.57	1-3	1,2	2.26	.32	.10	.15
Contribution-personal	18	1-4	1-3	12.41	.05	.32	.51	1-3	1-3	8.33	.08	.24	.31
Influence	12	1-4	1-4	6.48	.69	.22	.27	1-4	1-4	9.17	.42	.42	.42
Leadership-amount	29	1-4	1-4	6.71	.67	.10	.13	1-4	1-4	10.24	.33	.15	.20
Control	12	1,3,4	1,2,4	7.44	.11	.38	.43	1-4	1,2,4	3.56	.74	.14	.24
Leadership-evaluation	17	1-4	1-3	14.36	.03	.37	.58	1-3	1-3	7.14	.13	.22	.27
Affective reaction	12	1-4	1-3	11.30	.08	.46	.67	1-3	1-3	9.13	.06	.53	.53
HIGH													
Contribution-group	27	1-4	1,2	6.19	.10	.13	.20	1-4	1,2	11.28	.01	.20	.36
Contribution-personal	14	1,2	1,2,4	3.08	.22	.19	.14	1-3	1,2,4	13.39	.01	.56	.66
Influence	16	1-3	1,2,4	3.77	.44	.15	.18	1-4	1,2,4	6.49	.37	.19	.28
Leadership-amount	31	1-4	1-4	7.50	.59	.13	.14	1-4	1-4	16.63	.05	.24	.28
Control	26	1-3	1-3	3.50	.48	.06	.07	1-3	1-3	1.38	.85	.04	.04
Leadership-evaluation	35	1-4	1-4	9.08	.43	.14	.15	1-4	1-4	20.06	.02	.25	.30
Affective reaction	43	1-4	1-4	7.15	.62	.09	.09	1-4	1-4	15.51	.07	.16	.21

[a]Test of independence of cluster assignment for subjects responding either positively (High) or negatively (Low) to general evaluation items. Analyses excluded neutral responses.

[b]Proportional reduction in ERROR (PRE) for X given Y (X/Y).